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BJÖRNSON AND THE UNITED STATES

If there ever should come a time of misunderstanding between the Scandinavian countries on the one hand and America on the other, obscuring for each the true meaning of the other's national life and the content and value of its people's ideals, a better medium of mutual interpretation and reconciliation could hardly be found than the life of Björnstjerne Björnson. That Björnson was typically Norwegian, typically Scandinavian, is a commonplace which has its figurative expression in such often quoted phrases as "Norway's beating heart," "Norway's uncrowned king," and in Brandes' saying, that to mention Björnson's name is to raise the Norwegian flag. In comparing Ibsen and Björnson as poets and prophets it has been said with truth that the former was European, the latter Norwegian, Scandinavian. For our present purpose we may change this statement and say that if Ibsen was European, Björnson was American. To Americans Björnson's life reveals the true content and scope of Scandinavia's best ideals, political, social, spiritual; Scandinavia will find in his character, writings, and deeds an embodiment, unintended and unconscious, of what is highest and finest in the life of America, national and individual.

Specific mention of the United States is, however, rare in Björnson's literary works and in his published speeches and journalistic articles—so rare that judging by this alone one would be obliged to think that America occupied but little of his intellectual horizon and often for long periods was not present to his thought at all. In his novels and plays some of the characters go to the United States temporarily or permanently, as to an environment affording opportunity for some newness of individual life or for larger growth. Only in *Daglannet* (1904), Act III, Sc. 3, is there a somewhat detailed presentation of that which made the strongest impression on Ragna—the education of children. This seemed to her to be based on toleration and on respect for children, to aim at awakening the intellect and the sense of honor, to lead to freedom of conscience in individuals, who have learned what they ought to will, and whose wills are unbroken.

On May 3, 1866, at a patriotic gathering Björnson delivered a short speech in proposing the toast "Our Fatherland." Quotation from it may be ventured, because of the light here cast on his feelings toward the United States at a time when he probably did not know much about them, feelings of jealousy and sympathy, and because it sketches the general historical relations of Norway and the world without.

"Whenever in these days we are about to toast our fatherland, there presents itself involuntarily to our thought the fact that during the year fifteen thousand souls have turned their backs upon it, because here was not enough for them. However we may try to explain it, their going is felt as fifteen thousand complaints against the land and us, and we understand that after some years when they shall have established themselves in the new fatherland's large, fruitful conditions, they will see in old Norway that stone heap which is represented in Henrik Ibsen's grand, gloomy picture [*Brand* was published March 15, 1866], that they will remember their farm as something that has over it the cold and beneath it the wet. Can then we who are left behind confidently gather in gladness over this same fatherland, in youthful joy over what it has? Yes, we can—first, because we feel the need of doing this, and then because it never has been otherwise, since this people came into this land, than that all doors have stood open, and we have little cared who went out, or who came in. For we are proud of it, that we in our poverty have yet had a surplus for the countries that need capable men and women; and our emigrants clear from the days when they took Normandy have been regarded among the best, wherever they went. We are proud of that spiritual surplus, that creates the longing for adventure, that as soon as the soul feels itself confined, can embrace the wide world. We have this ourselves, we who are left here. For what else is it that mans and sends our ships out over all the world's oceans, that makes our great business men and our speculation, that impels us to conquests in science, art, and poetry, so great that they would be an honor to a mightier nation than ours? The difference is only this, that we return home again from our emigrations with the gains we have made, while those others remain away with theirs. The difference is the same as between them who built up the land with Harold Fairhair and

them who would not accept new conditions, but went to Iceland to build for themselves. The difference is this, that they move out, because here it is too narrow, but we stay at home in order to take away that which makes it narrow. The difference is this, that they move out because here are so many faults and defects, but we stay at home in order to make the faults and defects emigrate."

Some direct, intimate knowledge of life in the United States Björnson was able to gain during his sole visit here from September, 1880, to April, 1881. The first three or four months he spent in Massachusetts, where he enjoyed those opportunities that are always given to a distinguished foreigner. Then after a short stay in New York City, where incognito he observed the life of the masses, he went on a three months lecturing tour among the Scandinavians of the Northwest. At the time of his visit political life in Norway was in swift and comprehensive evolution. It would seem that Björnson came to the United States to study for himself the working of what he thought to be the most liberal constitution. Whatever may have been his theoretical profit, we may be sure that practically he learned more from personal observation of and relations with the life of New England, of cosmopolitan New York, of the Scandinavian Northwest. He was surprised to find people in general here so conservative. He conceived a great admiration for the character and career of Abraham Lincoln. How through Björnson Norway looked then for light to America is shown by the first paragraph of an article by him in *Scribner's Monthly* for February, 1881, on *Norway's Constitutional Struggle*: "I am glad that so many Americans are interested in this struggle. We should not have had it indeed, if in 1814 America's free constitution had not been given us as a pattern; if the glorious development of America under this, her constitutional aegis, had not given the Norsemen the initiative, given them instruction and confidence; and if the great emigration from Norway had not in many ways maintained a steady, aggressive propagation of republican rule and ideas."

As in this influence it was the spirit that imparted life, and not the letter, so it is not specific utterances in Björnson's writings and speeches that qualify him as an excellent medium of interpretation between the United States and Scandinavia, but the spirit that

informed all his life, deeds, and influence. This spirit was like that of America in the last century in its rapid growth and constant evolution, while it ever remained true to itself.

That sacred thing which we call patriotism, sincere, intense love of one's country and eagerness to labor and sacrifice for its good, is the dominant motive of Björnson's life, maintaining amid all apparent change and even contradiction its comprehensive unity. His country's national hymn is his creation. Does not the American heart beat to the strains of these, its last two stanzas?

"Men of Norway, high or lowly,
Give to God the praise!
He our land's Defender holy
In its darkest days!
All our fathers here have striven
And our mothers wept,
Hath the Lord his guidance given,
So our right we kept.

Yes, we love this land that towers
Where the ocean foams;
Rugged, storm swept, it embowers
Many thousand homes.
As our fathers' conflict gave it
Vict'ry at the end,
Also we, when time shall crave it,
Will its peace defend."

In the year 1881 speaking at the unveiling of the statue of Wergeland in Christiania Björnson said that he and Norway's constitution grew up together. In a broader and higher sense we may say that Björnson and Norway's full freedom and independence grew up together to the completeness that was realized in 1905. The truth of this statement is due to Björnson's patriotic spirit working out through his artistic production, his political agitation and speeches, and his journalistic activities. In all he, as a poet-prophet, interpreted for his nation the historic past and the evolving present, and forecast the future; in all he was for his own people the liberalizing teacher and guide, leading them to

freedom in thought and action, in social and political life; of all the unifying theme is Norway to be loved and labored for. Every true son of the United States must feel the rhythm of a brother's heart-beat in these stirring lines:

"Forward! forward!"
 Rang our fathers' battle-cry.
 "Forward! forward!"
 Norsemen, be our watchword high!
 All that fires the spirit and makes the heart's faith bright,
 For that we forward go with might
 And faithful fight.

"Forward! forward!"
 Whoso loves a home that's free.
 "Forward! forward!"
 Freedom's course must ever be.
 Though it shall be tested by doubt and by defeat,
 Who will the losses' count repeat,
 When vict'ries greet?

"Forward! forward!"
 Whoso trusts in Norway's day.
 "Forward! forward!"
 Whoso goes our fathers' way.

The country that Björnson so loved and praised was democratic, both politically, although it was and is a monarchy, and socially. It became progressively more democratic during his lifetime. There are some interesting passages in a speech which Björnson delivered in 1892 at a festival for Professor J. E. Sars upon the completion of his *Norwegian History*. For example Björnson said: "The work of a democratic society, for that our history has destined us; we must be able to succeed in it as no others can. To fix the thought of peace in the minds of men as a trusteeship of the labor and morals of the lesser, to put these themselves on guard in universal franchise and direct taxation; to make woman equal in law and in her conditions of life, to let the land be fully tilled by those who

will and can do this, to let factory labor and other labor be co-operative labor, to let the state-school become the nation's school; to work all these and similar thoughts, e.g., that of old age insurance, into life—in *one* word to *humanize* life—if we do not attain to this among the first, then we should not be true to our own history." . . . "Our way through history is the way of aristocracy forward to democracy. The aristocracy blends with the people, imparting thereby its own nobleness. Therefore until today our democratic accomplishment has for the most part had the impress of chieftainship. Respect for spirit as for law. To let the high be high, and the low be low; not to sin against this without at once feeling the wrong way. We do not destroy without building up; we have a strong sense for that which is fair." That is to say, Norwegian democracy was representative and conservative, not extremely radical and socialistic.

To admit that during the last quarter of a century both politics and life in Norway have become more radical and socialistic, is but to affirm that Norway has participated in the world's general movement. What Björnson thought or would now think of this we may infer from his speech in 1886 to the laborers of Christiania. It was based mainly on his observation of socialism as seen in France, whence he had just returned. Björnson said that Gambetta, who did not like the word socialism, asserted: "There is nothing that is rightly called socialism, but there is a series of social problems, and when these are solved one by one, then we shall have the socialized state." This met with Björnson's approval, and he desired that the Norwegians should not let themselves be frightened by the word "socialism," but should make it possible to have full discussion of these things also in Norway.

Björnson always favored a republican form of government as theoretically the best for such a democratic nation as Norway, but in 1905 when the federative union with Sweden was dissolved, practical consideration of the future relations of his country with Sweden and Denmark and with certain great powers of Europe forced him as the realist statesman he in so large a measure ever was, to support the continuance of the monarchical state.

It is, however, not only in external political forms that national likeness and sympathy express themselves. It is rather in the

social and economic domain that the true spirit and life of peoples are best shown. Here the ideals of Björnson are the American ideals of freedom and equality. He stood for that progressive emancipation of woman, which has advanced farther in Norway than in the United States, so that now woman may be said to be fully free and to have equal rights with man, politically, socially, economically. He agitated long, earnestly and successfully against the continued acceptance by social conventions of a double moral standard for man and woman, in his often delivered lecture on *Monogamy and Polygamy*, and in arduous journalistic polemics. He supported the cause of true liberty for children, pleading that they should be respected and laboring for reforms in the school. He instituted the beautiful custom of the children's flag procession on May 17, the Norwegian Independence Day. He desired education to be liberalized and modernized. Here he learned much from what he observed in the United States and in France. The former taught him the intellectual and ethical value of coeducation. Genuine economic liberty and equality were always promoted by him, equal duties and privileges for the farmer, the laborer, for all. In short he was and did what he describes in his poem, *The Poet*:

He is a brother of the small,
Of woman, as of all who suffer;
The new and weak, when waves grow rougher,
He steers, till fairer breezes fall.

Freedom of thought and speech has been from the beginning an ideal lovingly cherished by the people of the United States. In this respect Björnson was thoroughly American in spirit and in deed. The theme of a famous speech of his was: Be in the truth. The supreme thing is freedom of thought and fidelity to the truth as expanding development may manifest it to the individual and the nation.

In these present days it is Björnson's advocacy during the last years of his life of world-wide peace and of a league of nations to institute and maintain this, that must uniquely evoke the sympathy of the American mind and heart.

Whoever then desires to know and love the spirit and life of Norway and in general of Scandinavia, let him acquaint himself

with the ideals and the work of Björnson—patriot, democrat, republican, social and economic reformer, ethical leader, apostle of world-peace.

The poet does the prophet's deeds;
 In times of need with new life pregnant,
 When strife and suffering are regnant,
 His faith with light ideal leads,
 The past its heroes round him posts,
 He rallies now the present's hosts,
 The future opes
 Before his eyes,
 Its pictured hopes
 He prophesies.

ARTHUR H. PALMER.

New Haven, Conn.
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